

The Philip Weinberg Forum
11th Month, 11th Day, 11th Hour —
Armistice Day, 1918: World War I and Its
Violent Climax
Presented by Joseph Persico

November 8, 2004

Richard P. Nathan:

Our guest, Joseph Persico, is a close personal friend of Mary's and mine. I'm very impressed by the audience. This is a first-class audience. Early in the morning on a Monday, that says something. This is his eleventh book. It's about November 11th, the armistice and World War I, as you know if you've read the wonderful story about Joe with the great picture of him yesterday in the *Times Union*. It is appropriate that as one of his first times out to talk to people about this new book, which authors have to do in this world, he comes to the Rockefeller Institute because Joe worked for Nelson Rockefeller for eleven years. Something eerie here about the eleventh day of the eleventh month and the eleventh book and the eleven years working for Nelson Rockefeller after he worked for Averill Harriman.

Among Joe's books, of course, I think you know some. Between Mary and I, we've read all of them. We're big fans of his work. His book, *My American Journey* with Colin Powell, probably was the book that got the most circulation, but a lot of his books have become well known because he writes so beautifully and he uses such interesting

material. One of his books is a book about Nelson Rockefeller. That's why I say it's appropriate he should begin his tour here at the Rockefeller Institute. It is, I kid you not, the best book about Nelson Rockefeller. We both knew and worked with each other for Nelson Rockefeller and I've read all the Nelson Rockefeller books. None of them come near Joe's book.

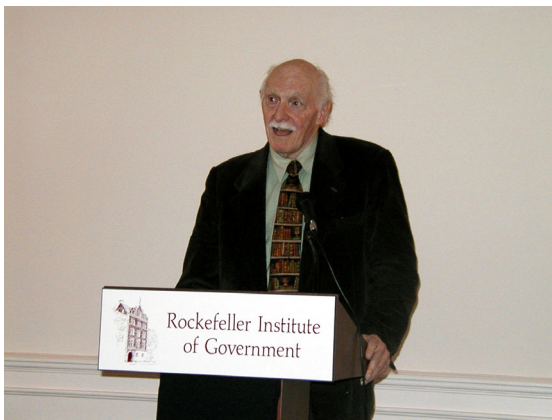


So, now the new book. If you wish, Joe will sign the copies. I read it because I had a very marked and bent-up copy of the galleys that they sent to us for today's event. I think is another winner, Joe. It is a *Book List* book for me. I like to write book lists. I put three words on the front page of the galleys. I've read the whole book and they capture what I take away from it: vivid, poignant, and frightening. I am very interested to hear him give a presentation about it and then to allow time for you to ask questions and comments. Joe, we thank you so much for coming.

Joseph E. Persico:

Good morning all. I was interested to see that this is the Philip Weinberg lecture. In the past, you thought of those kinds of names as institutional. I realized how many years I'm getting on by the fact that I used to go out to lunch quite frequently with Philip Weinberg, who was a colleague of mine in the Rockefeller administration. I'm happy to see other colleagues and friends — Mike Whiteman, Howard Shapiro — here this morning. In a way this is a genuine homecoming for me. I don't mean necessarily that it's here at the Rockefeller Institute or that I was a member of Nelson Rockefeller's staff. Many years before that, when I was on the staff of Averill Harriman, this magnificent structure was a rather seedy, rundown apartment house and as a 26-year-old bachelor I lived here.

On November 11, 1918, at around nine o'clock in the morning, the doughboys of the 26th Division were checking their ammunition and fixing their bayonets. These men were scheduled to launch an assault at 9:30 that morning in a war in which the Armistice had already been signed at five o'clock that morning and at eleven o'clock, the formal ceasefire. The men in the trenches were informed at something like 9:15 that that attack had been cancelled. The collective sense of joy that they were going to survive this war — they were going to live and they were going to go home — was practically audible and tangible in that trench.



Those hopes had grown out of something that had happened a few days before. On November 7, 1918, a group of French soldiers were huddled around an empty ammunition case. They were playing cards. Suddenly, they heard a distant, unfamiliar wail. They left the card game and went off to see what was coming. Out of the mist that evening there appeared three huge sedans bearing on their sides the gold seal of the German Empire. On the running boards, there were soldiers blowing five-foot-long silver bugles, a scene that seems out of the medieval era. What had arrived at the front line was a German armistice delegation. They had come to discuss peace terms with the Allied leadership. This had grown out of what had happened ten months before when President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed his fourteen points. What Wilson was trying to do was to achieve a civilized end to the uncivilized slaughter that had been going on for over three years at that point. He might have had the belligerence to accept peace without victory. So he proclaimed his fourteen points, which you remember perhaps from college history involved essentially a transparency in the relations between nations, self-determination particularly for colonial peoples, open seas, and some instrument that would overcome the war-breeding propensities of individual nations — a family of nations, a league of nations.

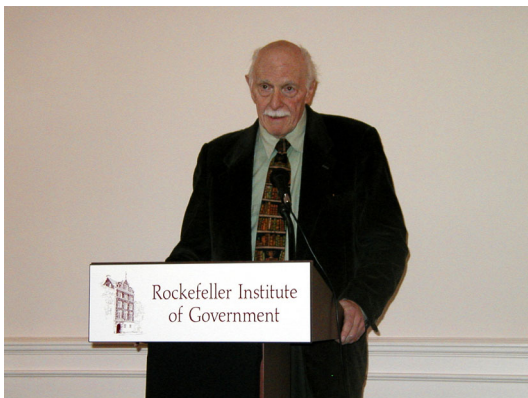
Well, the Germans had seized upon this as they saw their war hopes dimming. They seized upon the fourteen points and got Wilson to intercede. They were coming through the lines with a note from Wilson to discuss terms for ending the war with the Allied leaders. The German delegation was escorted on the morning of November 8th to a railroad car in the forest of Compiègne about 40 miles from Paris. This was a dining car that had been made into a makeshift conference room. What was interesting about it is that this was the same dining car in which the French had surrendered to the Germans in the War of 1870, the Franco-Prussian War, in which they had lost the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine.

They were met with a near arctic chilliness by the head of the Allied delegation, Marshal Ferdinand Foch, also the head of the Allied delegation. The Germans were met without even so much as a handshake. Foch shocked them by saying, "Why are you here?" The leader of that delegation was a rotund German socialist by the name of Matthias Erzberger. Erzberger said, "Marshal, we have come under the understanding of President Wilson that you're ready to discuss armistice terms." To which Foch shocked him again by saying, "I have no proposals to discuss." Instead he had one of his aides read about 30 terms that the Germans would be expected to accede to. These were hammer blows to the Germans. They were to give up their fleet. They were to give up their submarines. They were to give up their tanks. They were to give up their air force. They were to give up essentially their transportation system, their trucks, and their rail lines. Most galling for the Germans, the Allies made clear that they intended to continue the blockade that was virtually driving the German people into starvation. On top of that, Foch said, "You have 72 hours in which to accept these terms. If not, the war goes on."

Well, Delegate Erzberger pleaded with Foch and said, "Marshal, let us stop the killing while we talk." At this point, an average of 2,250 soldiers on all sides were dying daily on the Western front. So it seemed an eminently reasonable request, but Foch turned a dead ear to it. Foch was a man who in a single day had lost his soldier son and his soldier son-in-law. He had seen France laid waste during this war. France was essentially the principal battlefield of World War I. Indeed, he had told his aides that his

intention was to hold the sword to the back of the Hun to the last possible minute. Finally, at five o'clock of the morning of November 11th, the armistice was signed to go into effect six hours later.

The State Department called together drowsy members of the Washington Press Corp and told them that the armistice had been signed. Immediately, the *New York Times* was on the street with an extra edition proclaiming, "Armistice signed, war is ended." In Paris, the French premier George Clemenceau rose in the Chamber of Deputies and gave a speech that amounted simply to reading off the terms to which the Germans had yielded. And with each condition, a hoarse roar went up among the deputies in that chamber. Workmen went immediately out into the street and started scraping blue paint that had darkened the lamps of the City of Lights since the war had begun. In England, for the first time since 1914, Big Ben began tolling. There was a snake dance that began winding its way from Oxford Circus down Victoria Street with all the Brits singing a rather naughty ditty, "Knees Up, Mother Brown." In the United States, factory whistles hooted, firehouse sirens shrieked, church bells tolled, and people began pouring into the streets, burning effigies of the Kaiser. In Chicago, people commandeered cars for joy rides around the Loop, singing at the top of their lungs, "Over There." In New York City, the famed tenor Enrico Caruso came out on the balcony of the Knickerbocker Hotel and sang a Neapolitan accented version of *The Star Spangle Banner*.



Only one thing flawed this air of delirium that had swept the United States and other nations. And that was that war was really not yet over. It had six hours yet to run. The commander of the American expeditionary force, General John J. Pershing, had been unhappy with this armistice agreement. Pershing wanted to see the Germans driven back into their fatherland. He wanted them to yield to an unconditional surrender. He wanted that surrender signed in Berlin. And, with rather chilling foresight,

Foch said at the time that the Germans would now never believe that they were beaten. It will have to be done all over again.

Now what Pershing did, upon learning at five o'clock in the morning that the armistice had been signed, was to send to his subordinate commanders only this instruction, "Cease fire at eleven o'clock." He said nothing about what to do in the intervening six hours. So, in effect, he left his subordinates in a decisional no-man's land. The American generals essentially broke down into two groups. The first, rather belligerent, group took the position that here is a fast-fading opportunity for glory, for victory, even promotion. In those final hours, they sent men even in the final minutes out of the trenches and into the face of German artillery and German machine guns to take territory that under the terms of the armistice would have been yielded immediately. There was another group of generals who took a more reasonable and humane position and that was to tell their men to stand fast. They were not going to send doughboys to die taking ground that they could walk into peacefully the next day.

The Americans were certainly not the only ones that took a belligerent stance during those last hours. The British had taken a drubbing in the first days of the war and a pell-mell retreat from the Belgian city of Mons. So British commanders concluded that it would be an appropriate way to erase the stain of that defeat by retaking Mons, which at this point is momentarily inconsequential, on this last day of the war. The British troops stormed the city of Mons and among those who fall are a number of soldiers who were wearing a little ribbon, the Mons Star. The Mons Star meant that they had been in the initial engagement and now they have died on the last day of the war. The French, obeying the intent of Marshal Foch, indeed kept the sword to the back of the Huns until the last minute. One French regimental commander received two simultaneous orders. One said, "Cease fire at 11:00." The other said, "Launch your attack." So the Germans were left with no alternative but to fight a rearguard action and they did so very stubbornly. And, as usually happens among troops who are falling back, they took very heavy casualties.

This whole atmosphere was captured very well by a war correspondent from *The New York Times* by the name of Edwin James. James wrote that he had come to the front that morning expecting to find peace reigning in view of the imminent cessation of hostilities. Instead, he found the war being fought full scale. For example, among the American generals was one who commanded the 5th Corp, Charles Summerall. In the dawn hours of November 11th, Summerall sent his forces across the Meuse River. It was a cold, misty morning. The waters were icy and he sends these doughboys across the Meuse on hastily constructed, flimsy pontoon bridges, which swayed with the current of the river and from which these doughboys are picked off on this last morning of the war like ducks in a shooting gallery.



Another general, General Wright, had heard there were bathing facilities in the city called Stenay, a French city. His men were exhausted. They had been fighting for weeks. They were dirty and he thought, “Wouldn’t it be appropriate to give these chaps the opportunity to wash, clean themselves up, and take Stenay?”

Of additional attraction to General Wright, this would likely be the last French city taken back from the Germans in the war.

Another group that engaged was the 92nd Division. The 92nd was an all black division with white senior officers. The 92nd, like most black troops, had received second-class training, second-class weaponry, second-class duties — that is unloading ships and trains, burying the dead — but the 92nd was not spared on this morning. They were in woods, which they had taken gallantly the day before. At 10:30 that morning, they are ordered out of the woods into German machine gun fire and they take casualties.

I might mention that in the crossing of the Meuse River there was 1,130 doughboys who were either killed, wounded, or, after the engagement, missing. In taking Stenay, there were over 300 casualties. The 26th Division, which I mentioned at the outset of my talk, had their attack cancelled much to the relief of the troops. The attack

was reinstated at approximately 9:30. These men resumed checking their ammunition and fixing their bayonets. They go out of the trenches and go over the top in the last hour of the war. They took 120 casualties. There was a soldier by the name of Henry Gunther. Henry Gunther was a fine-looking soldier from Baltimore. He was a member of a regiment, the 313th, called Baltimore's Own. His regiment did not get the word that the armistice had been signed that morning. They were still advancing at quarter of eleven that morning. They were approaching a German machine gun nest and Gunther was in the van of these troops as they move forward. The Germans in the machine gun nest, they're waving them back and saying, "This is madness. Let's just wait a few minutes and then we can all go home." Henry Gunther is shot through the head and dies. He is regarded officially as the last American to die in World War I. He was killed at 10:59.

Now, on this day, on all sides, there were total casualties of 10,900 men dead, wounded, and missing. This is slightly higher than the total number of casualties on June 6, 1944, D-Day. With this distinction: The men who stood on the beaches of Normandy and died there lost their lives in a crusade to achieve Allied victory. Those who died on November 18, 1918, died in a war on which the treaty had already been decided. If the German delegation's leader, Egersberger, had been heeded on November 8th and the fighting had stopped while the talking went on, something like 6,600 men would have lived and would have survived the war. Some 15,000 who were wounded, blinded, disfigured, and dismembered would instead have gone home hail and healthy.

Now, is this senseless bloodletting on this last day a grim historic curiosity? Is it an extreme example of military pigheadedness? Hardly. What happened on the last day captured perfectly in a microcosm the nature of World War I from day one. That is essentially senseless killing to no positive. For example, two years before, the British Field Marshall Douglas Haig had concluded that he could win the war in the offensive of 1916 on the River Somme. An enormous number of men were sent to the trenches. Thousands of pieces of artillery led their advance. Something like a million shells were fired on that day. Nineteen thousand British Tommies, who at seven o'clock that morning were young, healthy, and alive, were dead within hours. Verdun, in the same year 1916,

is a charnel house between the German losses and the French losses — something like 690,000 were dead, wounded, or missing. Churchill captured it best. Churchill said, “The generals were fighting machine guns on the breasts of gallant men.”



And then the Germans saw their opportunity. In March of 1918, the German military mastermind, General Erich Ludendorff, spotted a window of opportunity. Ludendorff knew that American troops were pouring into France but they were not battle ready yet. They were not ready for full-scale operations. In the meantime, several months before, the Russians had dropped out of the war, which freed up dozens of German regiments and German divisions, which Ludendorff now brought into France. He launches on March 21, 1918, the first of five offenses, which are going to snatch victory for Germany from stalemate. It looks pretty good at first. His forces drive within forty miles of Paris. Then the old World War I pattern imposes itself: advance/retreat, offensive/counteroffensive, measure/countermeasure. In the meantime, the bodies pile up between the trenches by the time the war ended after three more months of bloodshed on November 11th, as I pointed out, at 11:00 that morning.

This was the war to end all wars. This was the rallying cry that sent millions of men to their deaths. The cry becomes obviously a hollow mockery. World War I is followed by World War II, which is far bloodier. In the period of our history since 1945, between wars among nations, civil wars, and insurgencies, something like 30 to 40 million people have died. One historian has calculated that in the period of recorded history, the world has been at peace 8 percent of the time. In World War I, what was it worth? The British historian, John Keegan, points out that had good will and prudence been given a voice at the beginning of that war it could have been avoided. Further, considering that the major legacy of World War I was military cemeteries and the planting of the seeds of the far bloodier World War II with something like 50 million dead. We can only conclude that at 9 million casualties in that war — British Tommies,

French *poilus*, American doughboys, and German soldiers — many, many men died in vain, which a brutal verdict. Sometimes these figures just tend to numb us, battles in which a 100,000 casualties or 200,000 men. Instead of sensitizing us, shocking us, they leave us numb by their magnitude. Let's try to put those losses in some kind of visual dimension. Let's say that all of the dead of the Western Front alone were to march past 411 State Street four abreast. That parade would start Monday morning and would run through the day. It would run through the night. It would run through the next day and into the next night, four by four marching across the street. That parade of the dead would end on a Saturday afternoon. To put it in even more personal terms, there is an epitaph on a tombstone from the war chiseled with these words, "To all the world he was a soldier. To me he was all the world."

Some historians have pointed to some good coming out of that war. Supposedly, it curbed German militarism. When we consider the subsequent aggressions of Hitler, which did not take place all that long after the first war, that respite from German militarism was short lived indeed. Historians have said that the war toppled out worn dynasties in Germany, Austria, Hungary, Turkey, and Russia. It might be hard to persuade a German standing in the rubble of Berlin in 1945 that he had been better off under Nazism than under the Hohenzollerns. It might have been difficult to persuade a Viennese that he had been better off as part of the Third Reich than under the Hapsburgs. It might be difficult to persuade a Muscovite that he had been better off under Stalinism than under the Romanovs.

Now, we're engaged in another war. Each casualty in that war is a personal and family tragedy. The casualties in Iraq run like a blood-red thread throughout of the discussion of that war during the recent presidential campaign. The jury of history is not yet selected, much less ready to render its verdict. In the worthiness of that war, I would have to say that the outcome of the recent election makes fairly clear that a healthy majority of American people is ready to bear that price and find the war worthwhile. It was something of a referendum on the war.

When I think of the predilection of human nature to resolve these kinds of conflicts on the battlefield, it strikes me that this behavior is so ingrained as to almost be genetic. I try to make some sense of it, but let's consider a length a rope. A length of rope can be used to save a man. A length of rope can be used to hang a man. The rope itself is neutral. When we look at wars, we find a rather similar test. What was the point of it? Was the war fought to end aggression? Was it to end subjugation of a people? Was it to topple a tyrant? Was it to end economic exploitation? Or was the war fought to launch aggression? Was it to bring about the subjugation of another people? Was it to impose a tyrant? Or to carry on economic degradations? This is the ultimate test.

In the course of my research, I studied the battlefields of World War I. I went to the American cemeteries and upon seeing crosses and Stars of David with the dates chiseled into stone "November 11, 1918," it is difficult not to despair of human conduct. We can only hope that the number of just wars outnumber the unjust. Any careful reading of history offers scant optimism on that count. On this rather cheerless observation, I will close my remarks and thank all of you for coming.

Richard P. Nathan:

Joe, that was great. We have a little time if you'd like to ask him questions. I'll start and Joe can recognize others of you. In the back of the book Joe tells about, and the stories are vivid, how he did this. How did he get these stories? I think it would be interesting if you'd share with us, Joe, a little bit about how you wrote this book. Where did you find all this?

Joseph E. Persico:

Most of the research was conducted at the National Archives, which is now in College Park, Maryland, an extraordinary facility. Much of the research was conducted at the Army History Institute, which is in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. I went to London and I researched in the Imperial War Museum. The most rewarding ore that I turned up in these places were personal history. An enormous number of doughboys and British Tommies

wrote what had happened to them, an outpouring. There are manuscripts, journals, diaries, and memoirs. That was enormously helpful. I had one particularly rich vein that I struck, which kind of amused me. I had a contact at the National Archives who one day wheeled to me a cart about as high as this lectern full of the mustiest books that you had ever seen. Nobody had looked at these things since the 1920s. They were covered with dust. They were regimental histories of the war, the provisional histories, the corps histories. I blew the dust off of them and the first thing I would do is go to the back of the book. Was this particular regiment, this unit, this army, this division engaged on the last day of the war? If it wasn't, I just tossed it aside. If it was, I would find these extraordinary stories, which found their way into my book.

Howard Shapiro:

Dick, I would just add one word to your description of the book on Joe's presentation and that is "riveting." You're struck when you go to Gettysburg and read some of the letters from the troops and how eloquent they were. You commented just now about the large amount of correspondence by various people. Do you find that that is at the same level and the same quantity as you go through later wars? It's hard to almost believe that people in World War II and the Korean War and then Vietnam the troops wrote at the same level and as frequently.

Joseph E. Persico:

Well, what I have found extraordinary was that if you remove the names and the units, the letters of a Tommy or doughboy or German soldier, they read identically. They have the same bitches for the most part on all sides. What was really extraordinary was a doughboy who wrote a letter home about what he hated in the war. His priorities kind of surprised me. What he hated most were his officers, then he hated the food, then he hated the non-coms. Down at the bottom of seven or eight complaints were the Germans because the Germans were going through the same thing he was. Another thing, that Howard has reminded me of, that I found really quite moving. Obviously the British class structure was very firm then, not quite as much today but certainly even more so then.

One of the most touching things I read was by a young officer out of Oxford who had to censor the mail of his men. He said after reading the articulateness of these people that he would never look down on what they call the lower orders ever again as he had before he went to the trenches.

Stuart Siebergleit:

What was the editorial comment following the eleventh? Based on what you told us today as to what happened, was there as a critical critique that you have offered today?

Joseph E. Persico:

Fairly soon after the war, letters began pouring in, particularly to members of Congress, from families wanting to know why a husband, son, or brother had been sent to his death with the outcome of the war absolutely certain. The level of inquiries reached a point where an investigation was launched. A congressional committee was created to study the last day of the war. Interestingly, the subcommittee came to a conclusion that was issued in a preliminary report, which said in effect senseless death had occurred on November 11th. Then politics raised its head. The war had been fought under a Democratic administration. Many Democrats in the House felt that this was a slur upon the American leadership in that war, a war in which the United States had emerged from victoriously. That report was squelched and in the end no blame was found, no culpability was laid at anyone's feet.

Roland Schmidt:

During the Bosnian conflict, the Clinton Administration was criticized to some degree because it refused to expend American military personnel. In fact, this is an enormously low-level of casualties that we had there, which was a miracle. I wondered in that stands in contrast to the attitude of people and character in World War II, where I'm not sure of the sum but the British had 40,000 casualties in one day? Do you think the basic attitude

has changed at all? The genetics are probably permanent but culturally are we in a different place with respect to the expenditure of people in such volume?

Joseph E. Persico:

I have a sense that history, like everything else, falls in the wake of technology. In Bosnia, it belongs to these so-called surgical air strikes. There's no way to do that. There was no way to stem an offensive in World War I in that way. It seems to me that this war could have been conducted with a little less loss of blood. The attitude of the generals was astonishing. I mentioned the Battle of Somme, Verdun, etc. What was the conclusion after the leadership suffered these casualties on such an extraordinary scale? Haig said after the Somme and 19,000 men were killed that day that this was not considered severe in light of the numbers that were engaged. What would you do if you had sent 100,000 young men out of the trenches and you didn't succeed? Let's send 200,000. If you lined up 4,000 piece of artillery and you didn't crack the enemy's front, you didn't destroy his wire, you send 6,000. You have a sense in reading of the battles of that war that the only lesson learned was that nothing was learned. Apart from the fact that we do it with greater technical ingenuity today, I still don't think very much is learned.

Thomas Constantine:

In my time in Northern Ireland, it was obvious to me that the Battle of the Somme was a major issue for Ireland and Northern Ireland. I got a sense, though I didn't pay as much attention to history as I should, that the Irish and northern Irish troops were used in that battle with significant losses. Although it's celebrated today, I also had a sense the people over there maybe thought they were used in those battles. Did you ever find out anything like that?

Joseph E. Persico:

I'll just note coincidentally that the only picture in my book of the Somme is an outfit called the "Tyneside Irish" and they took tremendous casualties. Whether they concluded

that they had been exploited I don't know, but it certainly would be a just conclusion if they come to it.



Richard P. Nathan:

I've a bunch of books that I want to get for all my friends and children and would like signed before you go. I'll ask a final question. The book begins with the murder of the Archduke and you tell a story that the only reason the Archduke was killed was because the driver took a wrong turn. One of the three assassins who were going to go home was right there and killed him. Do you think there was any way to stop that train? If the Archduke hadn't been killed, something else would have happened?

Joseph E. Persico:

It's one of these historical questions that are impossible to answer except that Europe just prior to the assassination was a continent where you had rivalries, alliances pitted against each other, great national pride, and the contest to see who could build the larger dreadnoughts. It seemed to me that Europe at that point was like a sea of gasoline and the

assassination of the Archduke by a Bosnian nationalist was like throwing a match into that sea of gasoline. If it had not happened then very likely it would have been something else that provoked it.

Richard P. Nathan:

I agree with Howard. I said the three words that struck me reading this book: vivid, poignant, and frightening. And Howard I agree with you, riveting. Now's your chance to get one of Joe's books and get them signed. Joe, we thank you so much.